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## **Who sets the standards rules the game: International policy for producing global indicators and reports**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines a relatively overlooked dimension of power in the international system, namely the political role played by global indicators and reports in shaping public policies and restructuring international positions. It is grounded in the central assumption that measurement and evaluation tools are no longer neutral technical instruments, but have evolved in to mechanisms of indirect governance through standards and numbers rather than direct coercion.

The article adopts a critical analytical approach that combines structural analysis of the relationship between knowledge and power with empirical examination of concrete cases drawn from development, education, and governance. It argues that global indicators do not merely describe reality but actively reconstruct it by defining what is measured, how it is measured, and who holds the authority to determine success and failure. Furthermore, it demonstrates how report outcomes are increasingly used in negotiations, development financing, and reputation-building, turning numerical rankings into influential elements of international decision-making.

The study also analyses different state strategies in responding to global evaluation regimes, distinguishing between strict compliance, selective adaptation, and methodological manoeuvring. It highlights the limited agency of states that

remain excluded from the production of global standards, as well as the structural biases embedded in claims of objectivity and neutrality.

The article concludes that the international politics of indicators constitute a subtle yet powerful arena of contestation over defining reality and progress. It calls for a shift from a narrow focus on improving rankings toward a strategy of knowledge reappropriation, based on critical engagement, institutional capacity-building, and active participation in the production of global standards.

**Keywords:** Global Indicators; International Reports; Knowledge and Power; Indirect Governance; Public Policy; International System.

### **Introduction:**

In recent decades, the international system has undergone a profound transformation in the mechanisms of exercising power and influence, which are no longer limited to traditional military or economic instruments of power, but are increasingly embodied in the production of knowledge, the formulation of standards, and the control of measurement and evaluation mechanisms. In a world governed by numbers, where policies are managed through indicators, reports and rankings, power is no longer the preserve of those who possess the means of coercion, but has become the preserve of those

who have the ability to define reality, determine what is measured, how it is measured, and by what standards.

International indicators, periodic reports and global rankings have become central tools in guiding public policy, formulating national priorities and reordering countries' positions within the international system. Development, transparency, education, governance, and risk are no longer discussed solely as political or social issues, but as numerical values that can be reduced to rankings, percentages, and standardised indicators used to judge the performance of states and justify decisions on funding, partnerships, and even indirect intervention. Knowledge has thus been transformed from a means of understanding into a tool of governance.

However, this transformation raises a central issue that goes beyond the technical debate about the accuracy or objectivity of indicators, touching on the deep political dimension behind their production. Indicators are not produced in a vacuum, nor do they reflect reality in a neutral way. Rather, they are constructed according to methodological choices, normative assumptions, and specific institutional contexts. Therefore, the fundamental question is not only what these indicators measure, but also who sets them, who determines their criteria, and who benefits from their results. Implicitly, possessing the power to measure means possessing the power to define success and failure, progress and backwardness, commitment and deviation.

This reveals the emergence of what might be called international knowledge politics, in which indicators and reports become mechanisms of indirect governance, through which power is exercised without the need for explicit coercion. In many cases, countries are forced to adjust their policies or rearrange their priorities in response to the logic of rankings and reports, in order to avoid damaging their international image, losing the trust of their partners, or declining in economic attractiveness. Thus, measurement becomes a tool for guidance, and evaluation becomes a mechanism for control.

Based on this, this article raises a key question: **to what extent do global indicators and reports constitute indirect governance tools that redistribute power within the international system?** This question branches out into a number of sub-questions, including: how are international indicators produced, and who sets their standards? What is the nature of the relationship between knowledge and power in the contemporary international system? How do these tools influence the policies of states, especially developing and middle-income countries? Finally, what are the limits of neutrality and objectivity in global measurement systems?

The article assumes that the production of indicators and reports is not a neutral technical process, but rather an institutional political practice that contributes to the reordering of states' positions within the international system through symbolic and regulatory mechanisms that are less confrontational but more effective and sustainable. It also assumes that countries that do not participate in the production of standards remain subject to external evaluation, even if they have a margin of sovereignty in other areas.

The article adopts a critical analytical approach based on a structuralist methodology to deconstruct the relationship between knowledge and power, and on an analytical methodology to study the mechanisms of producing indicators and reports and their political impact. It also uses multiple sectoral examples, without falling into description, to highlight how politics is exercised through numbers and standards. In doing so, the article seeks to open a scientific debate on one of the most hidden and influential aspects of international power, in a world where power is no longer exercised only through weapons or money, but also through standards, numbers and classifications.

### **The first axis: the conceptual framework of international politics for the production of global indices and reports**

Analysing the political role of global indicators and reports requires moving beyond treating them as neutral technical products and questioning them as a knowledge practice with authoritarian implications. Before examining how indicators are used to rearrange international positions, it is necessary to deconstruct the conceptual framework that makes knowledge a tool of governance and measurement a means of producing standards, rather than merely describing reality. The fundamental question is not only what indicators measure, but also the logic that governs their production and the authority that gives them the power to define reality and determine what constitutes progress or failure.

This theme aims to frame the concept of international politics of knowledge by analysing the transformation of knowledge from a resource for understanding to a mechanism for guidance, and from a tool of interpretation to a normative structure through which priorities and policies are formulated. It also seeks to highlight how the authority of measurement is constructed and the transition from raw data to normative indicators, considering this a political moment par excellence, in which complex phenomena are reduced to comparable and generalisable models.

Based on this introduction, the section paves the way for understanding the theoretical foundations that make indicators and reports tools of indirect governance, and establishes the

conceptual framework necessary for analysing their practical effects in subsequent sections.

## **1. Knowledge as power: from information production to standard setting**

Knowledge in global politics is no longer merely a cultural asset or research material, but has become a structure of governance embodied in the ability of specific actors to transform complex social and political phenomena into measurable and comparable "standards." This is precisely where the idea of international knowledge politics comes in: power is exercised not only through decisions or threats, but also by defining what constitutes a standard of success and what constitutes evidence of failure, and then disseminating this as a "neutral language" that speaks to everyone.<sup>1</sup>

This power becomes clear when we notice that global indicators do not merely describe reality, but reconstruct it: they select what is worth measuring (such as transparency, quality of education, "governance") and exclude what is difficult to measure or what might embarrass the measurement system itself. Once these concepts are converted into grades and rankings, countries—regardless of their different contexts—find themselves in a symbolic race: rising in the rankings means international recognition, while falling in them can mean financial or political pressure or a negative reputation among investors and partners.

Thus, the equation is not only "who owns the information," but also "who owns the standard": because the standard determines what countries should seek to reform first, at what speed, and with what priority. This creates a kind of governance through reputation: the state is not legally compelled to adopt certain policies, but it is effectively pushed to do so to avoid the cost of a lower ranking. In this sense, the index becomes similar to a "soft law": it does not require a text, but it does require an impact.

To understand the depth of this authority, it suffices to note that some major indices cover a wide global scope and produce a "symbolic hierarchy" of countries. The Corruption Perceptions Index, for example, ranks 180 countries and territories annually on a single numerical scale, turning the global assessment of corruption governance into a reference

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<sup>1</sup> International knowledge policy refers to the set of practices through which knowledge and standards are produced, organised and disseminated at the international level, making them tools for influencing and guiding the behaviour of states without resorting to direct coercion.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1980, pp. 109–133.

<sup>3</sup> The power of measurement refers to the ability to determine what is measured and how it is measured, and then to convert complex phenomena

image circulated by the media, donors, financial institutions and markets.<sup>2</sup> This "image" does not remain neutral; it becomes a ready-made interpretive tool, used to justify decisions on cooperation, reservations or reform requirements.

## **2. From information to indicator: how is measurement authority built?**

The transition from raw information to indicators is a political moment par excellence, because indicators are not innocent numbers, but rather systematic and persuasive decisions: decisions about what will be reduced to a number, how weights will be calculated, and who will be considered a reliable source of information. Here, measurement authority is embodied in three interrelated cycles: selecting variables, choosing a method of calculation, and then disseminating the results as a benchmark for comparison.<sup>3</sup>

Let us take an example from the field of development: global measurement rules are often presented as templates that can be applied to everyone. However, global data platforms may show a ranking of 193 countries and territories within a single database, placing the state before an international digital mirror that may sometimes conflict with its internal narrative or national priorities.<sup>(4)</sup> At this point, the political debate (what do we need?) becomes crowded out by a digital debate (how do we raise our ranking?), and what might be called a "goal shift" occurs: policies shift from addressing the problem to improving the indicator, because the indicator has become the standard of external judgement.

This effect is amplified in education, for example, where vastly different education systems are measured by broad international tests. In assessments such as PISA 2022, 81 countries/economies (approximately 700,000 students) participated, turning test results into a global comparison platform used to reform curricula, direct funding, and even construct narratives of "success" or "failure" for education policies. <sup>(5)</sup> Here, the indicator does not merely describe education; it formulates what is internationally understood as "good education" and then pushes countries to move closer to this model.

into standard indicators used for evaluation, comparison, and decision-making.

<sup>4</sup> Sally Engle Merry, *The Seductions of Quantification: Measuring Human Rights, Gender Violence, and Sex Trafficking*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2016, pp. 1–28, 83–112.

<sup>5</sup> World Bank, *World Development Report 2021: Data for Better Lives*, Washington D.C., 2021, pp. 17–41.

More dangerously, the authority of measurement does not work only through numbers, but also through explanatory reports that accompany the numbers with ready-made prescriptions: recommendations, reform paths, and "best practice" models. The reports thus become a mechanism for "remote control": the state may remain legally sovereign, but it is partially managed through external evaluation systems that rearrange its priorities and push it to adopt certain options because they "improve results" or "reduce risks" in the eyes of partners.

In short, indicators are not merely technical tools; they are a language of governance: they simplify the complex, generalise comparisons, and then produce soft pressure that pushes states to adapt. Therefore, understanding the international politics of indicators does not begin with the question "Is the indicator accurate?" but rather with the question "How does the indicator produce political obedience without political command?" This is the real key to understanding the unprecedented approach proposed in this article.

### **The second axis: international indicators as tools of indirect governance**

If the first axis focused on deconstructing the conceptual foundations of international policy for producing indicators, the transition to analysing the functions of these indicators raises a more direct question: how do measurement tools become mechanisms of indirect governance? The challenge lies not in proving the political nature of indicators in principle, but in understanding how power is exercised through evaluation, classification and reputation building, without resorting to traditional instruments of coercion.

This theme starts from the premise that indicators do not merely measure performance, but also redirect public policy through the normative and symbolic pressures they create. Once the results of reports are used as a reference for funding, partnerships or risk assessment, the figures become instruments of control, and compliance with them becomes a quasi-mandatory option, even in the absence of an explicit legal obligation. This is where the mechanism of indirect governance comes into play, where power is exercised through incentives and reputation rather than orders and sanctions.

This section aims to analyse the paths by which indicators move from assessment to guidance and to reveal the limits of

the declared neutrality that accompanies them, by highlighting their impact on the rational reordering of political action and the formulation of public policy priorities. It also paves the way for understanding the differences between compliance, alignment and manoeuvring as different political responses to the logic of international measurement.

### **1. From assessment to guidance: how indicators become mechanisms of political control**

While international indicators are presented in official discourse as neutral measurement tools, their practical impact reveals a deeper function that goes beyond description to indirectly guide public policy. Indicators do not merely classify or rank countries; they create a general normative logic that redefines what constitutes 'good' or 'bad' policy, and what is considered a 'necessary' reform or an 'irrational' choice. In this sense, the assessment becomes a mechanism of soft control exercised without issuing orders or imposing direct legal obligations.<sup>6</sup>

This mechanism is evident when donor institutions, international partners, or financial markets rely on indicators and reports as a simplistic reference for decision-making. Instead of engaging in an in-depth analysis of national contexts, the state is reduced to a number, rank or grade, which is then used to justify funding conditions, direct investments or rearrange priorities in cooperation programmes. Thus, the question is no longer "What is the most appropriate policy for this country?", but rather "How will this decision affect its position in the index?"

This shift leads to what might be called a policy of voluntary compliance, whereby countries rush to adopt the recommendations of international reports, not necessarily because they are convinced of their internal appropriateness, but to avoid the symbolic cost of a negative ranking. A low ranking is not only seen as a technical fact, but also as a political signal used in media and diplomatic discourse, and may become a source of internal pressure on decision-makers. In this way, power is exercised through reputation rather than coercion.<sup>7</sup>

Multiple experiences show that some reforms included in government agendas are sometimes formulated according to the logic of "improving the index" rather than addressing structural problems. In this case, the success of a policy is not measured by its actual social impact, but by its ability to raise the ranking or improve the score. This is where the

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<sup>6</sup> Indirect governance refers to influencing the behaviour of states through normative and regulatory tools, without resorting to direct legal or military coercion.

<sup>7</sup> Ahmed Zayed, *Power and Knowledge in Contemporary Society*, World of Knowledge series, no. 403, National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters, Kuwait, 2013, pp. 45–67.

unprecedented power of indicators lies: they not only reorder countries, but also reorder the rationality of political action itself.

## **2. Global reports between declared neutrality and structural bias**

Global reports derive their power from their claim to scientific objectivity, but a deconstruction of their internal structure reveals the existence of unstated structural biases that are not linked to direct political intent, but rather to the nature of the epistemological framework in which they are produced. The report does not convey reality as it is, but rather reformulates it through selected concepts, indicators, and interpretive models that reflect a specific vision of development, governance, or progress.<sup>8</sup>

This structural bias is evident in two fundamental issues. The first concerns the standardisation of measurement criteria despite differing contexts, whereby countries with diverse histories, institutions and social structures are measured using uniform tools, reducing local complexity to a single standardised model. The second relates to the centrality of the knowledge product, as the majority of indicators and reports are formulated within specific knowledge spaces, often in the global North, and then presented as universal standards applicable to all.

This situation leads to an unequal relationship between those who produce knowledge and those who are subject to evaluation, as developing and middle-income countries are denied effective participation in the formulation of standards, but are required to comply with them. This imbalance is exacerbated when reports become reference tools for assessing “worthiness” or “risk”, directly affecting funding flows, a country’s image and its negotiating power.<sup>9</sup>

However, the problem lies not only in the existence of biases, but also in the neutralisation of the debate around them. Once a report is classified as ‘scientific’, the door to political debate is closed, and its findings become unquestioned givens. This is where the most dangerous function of international politics of knowledge becomes apparent: depoliticising tools that are essentially political and then using them to reengineer international behaviour.

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<sup>8</sup> Abdul Ilah Belqaziz, *Knowledge and Power in Contemporary Political Thought*, Arab Cultural Centre, Casablanca–Beirut, 2019, pp. 91–118.

<sup>9</sup> Mohammed Abed al-Jabri, *The Arab Political Mind*, Centre for Arab Unity Studies, Beirut, 6th ed., 2017, pp. 233–261.

This analysis reveals that indicators and reports do not operate in a vacuum, but within a network of interests, assumptions, and unequal relationships. Therefore, treating them as neutral technical tools is a flawed interpretation that overlooks their actual role as mechanisms of indirect governance, reproducing power in less confrontational but more entrenched and sustainable forms.<sup>10</sup>

## **The third axis: global reports and the rearrangement of international positions between evidence and analysis**

Global reports are no longer received as neutral diagnostic tools, but have come to perform a practical political function, embodied in the reordering of international positions through precise symbolic and organisational mechanisms. The ranking recorded in an international report does not remain confined to statistical tables, but becomes an active element in building international reputation, guiding decisions, and reshaping relations between states and international institutions. Hence, understanding the impact of reports requires moving from analysing their discourse to tracking their practical effects in the areas of negotiation, financing, and policy-making.

### **1. Rankings as a negotiating tool: from indicator to decision**

Recent events show that the results of global reports are used, directly or indirectly, as a reference in international decision-making. Since the late 2000s, governance and institutional quality indicators have been used to assess countries’ eligibility for development financing programmes, with “improved institutional performance” being linked to easier lending conditions or faster support procedures.<sup>11</sup> Although this link is not always formulated as an explicit legal condition, it functions as an unspoken selection mechanism that favours countries with a positive digital image.

This use leads to the ranking becoming a bargaining chip, i.e. an element that is exploited in negotiations even outside the area in which it was measured. A country classified as “well-performing” in the area of governance is treated as less risky and more amenable to partnership, even if the report’s findings are not directly related to the negotiation file in question. Here, the index becomes a shorthand for judging the state, dispensing with contextual analysis and giving the

<sup>10</sup> United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report: Beyond Income and Rankings*, Arabic translation, Regional Office for Arab States, 2022, pp. 15–32.

<sup>11</sup> The negotiating position refers to the place occupied by the state within international negotiation, financing and partnership networks, as shaped by the results of global reports and rankings.

report's producers indirect authority to reorder the priorities of partners.<sup>12</sup>

This dynamic reveal that the reports not only measure reality, but also reproduce it politically, by transforming the assessment into symbolic capital that can be traded within international decision-making networks.

## **2. Education as a case study: when reports reshape national policies**

The field of education is one of the clearest examples of the practical impact of international reports. The results of the 2018 and 2022 PISA tests showed significant disparities between participating countries, prompting a number of governments to announce sweeping education reforms immediately after the results were released. In several cases, “improving the country’s ranking in international assessments” was included in official education reform documents as an indicator of the quality of the education system and the effectiveness of public policies.<sup>13</sup>

However, analysis of these reforms shows that the response to the report was not always based on a thorough internal diagnosis, but rather on a logic of responding to measurement. Some policies tended to focus on the subjects measured and to adapt curricula to the logic of testing, allowing for improved numerical performance, even if this did not address the structural imbalances in the education system. Thus, the report is no longer merely an assessment tool, but has become a priority setter and a guide for public action.

This example shows that reports influence not only the content of policies, but also the very rationality of decision-making, as political success is redefined in terms of the ability to improve indicators rather than in terms of long-term social impact. This raises critical questions about the limits of standardised tools in guiding complex policies rooted in the national context.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Symbolic Domination*, translated by George Katoura, Dar Al-Tali'ah, Beirut, 2014, pp. 37–55.

<sup>13</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Results of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA 2022)*, Arabic translation, Regional Office for the Middle East and North Africa, 2023, pp. 14–29.

## **3. International reputation and the reproduction of knowledge inequality**

The impact of the reports goes beyond sectoral policies to affect the overall structure of international relations by reproducing a symbolic hierarchy among countries. Countries that improve their ranking in indicators such as “ease of doing business” or “investment attractiveness” often benefit from an improved image among economic actors, even before tangible economic transformations have taken place. Arab studies have shown that some improvements in rankings, resulting from methodological adjustments, have been directly reflected in investment and media discourse, despite limited real change.<sup>15</sup>

In contrast, other countries face what could be called an evaluation lock, where they remain trapped in a low ranking, not only because of the deterioration of their conditions, but also as a result of the methodologies used in the measurement, which may not take into account their structural specificities. This situation reduces room for manoeuvre and weakens the ability to improve international standing, thereby contributing to the reproduction of knowledge inequality within the international system.

These facts reveal that global reports, despite their claims of neutrality, play an effective political role in rearranging international positions by transforming differences into widely circulated numerical facts that are difficult to deconstruct or question. The challenge, therefore, lies not in rejecting or unconditionally accepting these reports, but in building critical and institutional capacities that allow us to understand their logic, interact with them consciously, and prevent them from becoming unaccountable mechanisms of control.<sup>16</sup>

### **The fourth axis: the limits of neutrality and the possibilities of reclaiming knowledge**

The prevailing discourse on global indicators and reports presents them as based on scientific neutrality and technical objectivity, but actual practice reveals that this neutrality remains more of a normative assumption than a procedural reality. As the product of specific methodological and institutional choices, indicators always reflect a particular

<sup>14</sup> Ahmed Zayed, *Power and Knowledge in Public Policy*, *World of Knowledge*, Issue 421, National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters, Kuwait, 2015, pp. 63–82.

<sup>15</sup> Mohammed Fayed Farhat, *International Rankings and the Image of the State in the Global Economy*, *International Politics Magazine*, Issue 231, Cairo, 2020, pp. 41–58.

<sup>16</sup> Abdul Ilah Belqaziz, *Globalisation, Knowledge and Power*, Arab Cultural Centre, Casablanca–Beirut, 2020, pp. 121–139.

conception of the world and of what constitutes progress or failure. Hence, this theme does not ask the question, “Are indicators neutral?” but rather a deeper question: What are the limits of this neutrality? How can states reclaim ownership of measurement tools?

### **1. Normative neutrality and its limits: when politics hides behind technology**

One of the most prominent characteristics of international indicators is their ability to hide the political dimension behind seemingly neutral technical language. Once a social or political phenomenon is converted into numbers, it is stripped of its connotations of conflict and interpretation and presented as objective truth. However, this conversion itself involves preconceived decisions: What is being measured?? What weight is given to each element? These are normative decisions that cannot be separated from the context in which they were made.<sup>17</sup>

The facts show that many global reports rely on standardised assessment models, which are applied to highly diverse national contexts, leading to results that may appear scientific but conceal a structural bias in favour of particular organisational or institutional models. When “good governance” or “quality of public policies” are measured according to a single standard model, political success is redefined to fit that model, rather than the needs of the society concerned. Thus, declared neutrality becomes a tool for legitimising a particular vision of development and organisation.

This path leads to the neutralisation of political debate on public choices, as decisions become technical responses to measurement requirements rather than the subject of internal democratic debate. The most dangerous aspect of indicators is not their accuracy or lack thereof, but their ability to exclude politics through measurement techniques.

### **2. From compliance to critical engagement: the potential for reclaiming knowledge**

Despite the power of international measurement systems, they do not close the door to action, but rather open up varying possibilities for cognitive reappropriation. In recent years, some countries have begun to move from a logic of passive compliance to one of critical engagement with indicators, by

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<sup>17</sup> Normative neutrality refers to the claim that measurement and evaluation tools are free from values and preconceptions, even though they are in fact based on implicit normative assumptions.

<sup>18</sup> Abdelilah Belkziz, *Knowledge and Power in Contemporary Political Thought*, Arab Cultural Centre, Casablanca–Beirut, 2019, pp. 145–163.

building institutional capacities to understand methodologies, participate in technical discussions, and influence certain aspects of knowledge production.<sup>18</sup>

This shift is reflected in investment in national units specialising in reading international indicators, not only with the aim of improving rankings, but also to understand the logic of measurement itself and identify its strengths and weaknesses. It is also evident in the attempts of some countries to provide alternative data or propose methodological adjustments that take into account national specificities, especially in social and cultural areas that are difficult to reduce to standardised figures.

However, reclaiming knowledge does not necessarily mean rejecting indicators or withdrawing from their system, but rather dismantling their symbolic authority and treating them as tools that are open to discussion and accountability. Participation in the production of knowledge, even if only partial, reduces the gap between producer and evaluator and opens the door to more pluralistic approaches to defining progress and performance.

### **3. Towards an alternative approach: from reception to participation in standard-setting**

The analysis suggests that the real challenge lies not in improving countries' positions within the rankings, but in participating in the creation of the standard itself. Countries that remain outside the sphere of international knowledge production will, no matter how much they improve their ranking, remain subject to an external evaluation logic over which they have no control. Countries that succeed in establishing a presence within networks of experts, technical bodies and institutions that produce indicators gain a relative ability to influence what is measured and how it is measured.<sup>19</sup>

Recent studies indicate that engagement in these networks does not necessarily require significant material resources, but rather long-term investment in knowledge, expertise, and institutions. Influencing methodologies often begins with technical details (), but it has far-reaching political implications because it redraws the boundaries of what is acceptable and normative in public policy.

Knowledge reappropriation is therefore a strategic path for states seeking to reduce the imbalances of the international

<sup>19</sup> Ahmed Zayed, *Globalisation and the Production of Social Knowledge*, World of Knowledge, Issue 389, National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters, Kuwait, 2012, pp. 97–116.

system, not through direct confrontation, but by renegotiating the rules of measurement themselves. This makes international indicator policy a quiet but profound arena of conflict over the definition of reality, the determination of standards of progress, and the distribution of legitimacy within the international system.<sup>20</sup>

### **Research methodology and procedures:**

This article adopts a critical analytical approach based on the consideration of international indicators and reports as indirect political tools, rather than mere technical measurement mechanisms. This approach was chosen with the aim of moving beyond a descriptive reading that merely presents indicators and their results, towards deconstructing the logic of their production, their political functions, and their practical effects in rearranging international positions.

The research is based, on the one hand, on a structural approach, analysing the relationship between knowledge and power in the international system and revealing how measurement tools are integrated into systems of governance and indirect control. This approach is used to understand the institutional and epistemological context in which indicators are produced and to reveal the limits of their professed neutrality.

Second, the article employs a comparative analytical approach, studying real-life cases from different fields, such as education, development and governance, with the aim of highlighting the variation in states' interactions with the logic of classification and evaluation. The examples used are not intended to be complete case studies, but rather analytical facts that contribute to testing the hypotheses put forward.

The research also relies on a documentary analysis of a set of international reports translated into Arabic, in addition to Arab intellectual references that address the issue of knowledge and power, in order to ensure the consistency of the analysis with the theoretical context of the article and to avoid generalisations. This methodological choice aims to provide a balanced critical reading that combines theoretical deconstruction and factual reasoning, without falling into reporting or excessive abstraction.

## **Findings and recommendations:**

### **First: Findings**

The analysis led to a number of key findings:

First, international indicators and reports are no longer neutral descriptive tools, but have become mechanisms of indirect governance that contribute to guiding public policy and rearranging international positions through the symbolic and normative pressures they create. The article shows that numerical rankings have come to serve a practical political function, being used in negotiations, financing, and the building of international reputations.

The research also showed that the authority of indicators stems not only from their results, but also from the methodologies on which they are based and the claim of neutrality that surrounds them. The indices redefine concepts such as "progress," "quality," and "governance" according to specific normative models, leading to the marginalisation of national contexts and the forced standardisation of policy trajectories.

Another important consequence is that countries do not interact with the reports in the same way; rather, their strategies range from literal compliance to selective harmonisation and systematic manoeuvring. However, countries' ability to manoeuvre remains conditional on their possession of institutional and knowledge competencies that allow them to understand the logic of measurement and engage critically with it.

### **Second: Recommendations**

Based on these findings, the article recommends the following:

1. The need to move from a logic of improving rankings to a logic of understanding methodologies, and not reducing public policies to responding to the requirements of indicators.
2. Strengthening national capacities to analyse international indicators and reports by creating specialised units within public institutions to interpret measurement tools, not just their results.
3. Encouraging active participation in international knowledge production networks, allowing for gradual influence on the formulation of standards and reducing the gap between producer and evaluator.

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<sup>20</sup> United Nations Development Programme, Human Development Report: Beyond Measurement, Arabic translation, Regional Office for Arab States, 2023, pp. 41–59.

4. Adopting a critical approach to global reports, based on interaction and accountability, rather than unconditional acceptance or emotional rejection.
5. Incorporate the contextual dimension into the evaluation of public policies, to avoid turning indicators into an end in themselves rather than a means of understanding and improvement.

### Conclusion:

This article concludes that the international policy of indicators and reports constitutes one of the most hidden and influential aspects of contemporary power, exercising hegemony through numbers and standards rather than direct coercion. The analysis shows that indicators not only reflect reality, but also contribute to reshaping it by guiding policies, building international reputations, and rearranging positions within the international system.

The article also shows that the claim of scientific neutrality conceals politically motivated normative choices, turning measurement tools into mechanisms of indirect governance that reproduce knowledge inequalities between countries. However, this reality does not mean that we must inevitably submit to the logic of external evaluation. Rather, it opens the door to conscious strategies for reclaiming knowledge, based on critical understanding, capacity building, and participation in standard-setting.

The article thus calls for a rethinking of the relationship between knowledge and power in global politics, viewing indicators and reports not as neutral technical data, but as arenas of quiet conflict over the definition of reality, the determination of standards of progress, and the distribution of legitimacy within the international system. This is an ongoing debate that warrants further research, given the increasing reliance on figures and standards in the management of international affairs.

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